Southlake: A History of Fun and Recreation

Parks + Recreation (Vigo Co)

South Lake Park

by Tammie Edington

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It is 80 acres as a whole, one and one-half miles long, glistens in the sunlight, and its name is South Lake.

Located near Darwin Road, southwest of West Terre Haute, is a recreational area which has been home and work for the Herb Mason family.

Herb graduated from Indiana State University in 1939 and taught for a short time at Montezuma, Indiana, before entering the U.S.Army.

After the Army, Herb purchased 103 acres in southwestern Vigo County on July 16, 1946, which was overgrown with trees and included a sizable body of water, with plans of making it into a recreational facility.

"I told my wife we'd try it and if it didn't work, we'd sell it," recalls Herb.

That summer he rented fishing boats and did well and he moved the family to the area in the fall of that same year. "I remember that summer (1946) I stayed in a pup tent by the lake during the week and on weekends I'd go home (the family resided in New Lebanon, Indiana, Herb's hometown) alternating with this other guy," said Herb.

In 1947 the first beachhouse was constructed, measuring 20' x 50'.

Many improvements followed with swimming becoming a part of the program in 1948, followed by camping, teen dances and a place for many water events.

In the late 1940s and through the 1950s boating was a thriving sport. Many boat races, featuring hydroplanes and runabouts, were held at the lake, many sponsored by the Indiana Outboard Association.

A national event was the Women's National Swimming Meet, sponsored by the American Legion. Also, in the mid 1950s, Paitson Brothers held their boat show at the lake.

Florence, Herb's wife, ran the facility along with the children, for a year (1950-51) as Herb was called back into active duty in Japan.

A new beachhouse, which is still used, was constructed in 1956, and during the 1960s many dances were held "on the roof," where hundreds of teenagers spent their Sunday evenings. The dances were discontinued on a regular basis in 1975, and are held very sporadically now, as "a new trend and different kids enjoy other things, I guess," said Herb.

Southlake, familiar to many as south pit, is still a family business, as Florence manages the concession stand, and sons John and Steve manage the beach.

A recent change is a 33 foot tower with diving platforms at 33', 20' and 10', constructed by the Masons.

The lake is also watched by two experienced lifeguards, David Vanatti and Yvonne Kapicik.

Herb also found time to do substitute teaching during his time as owner of the lake, working at Consolidated, Concannon, and West Vigo schools. Many may also remember Herb as a school bus driver, a job he held from 1959 to 1971.

Although camping is now on a restricted basis, and dances are few, swimming is still enjoyed by young and old and is an inexpensive way of spending the beautiful days of summer.

When the father of six, teacher and bus driver, was asked what he enjoyed most about managing an establishment like Southlake, the tanned face of Herb Mason lit up and remarked, "Watching the kids have a good time."

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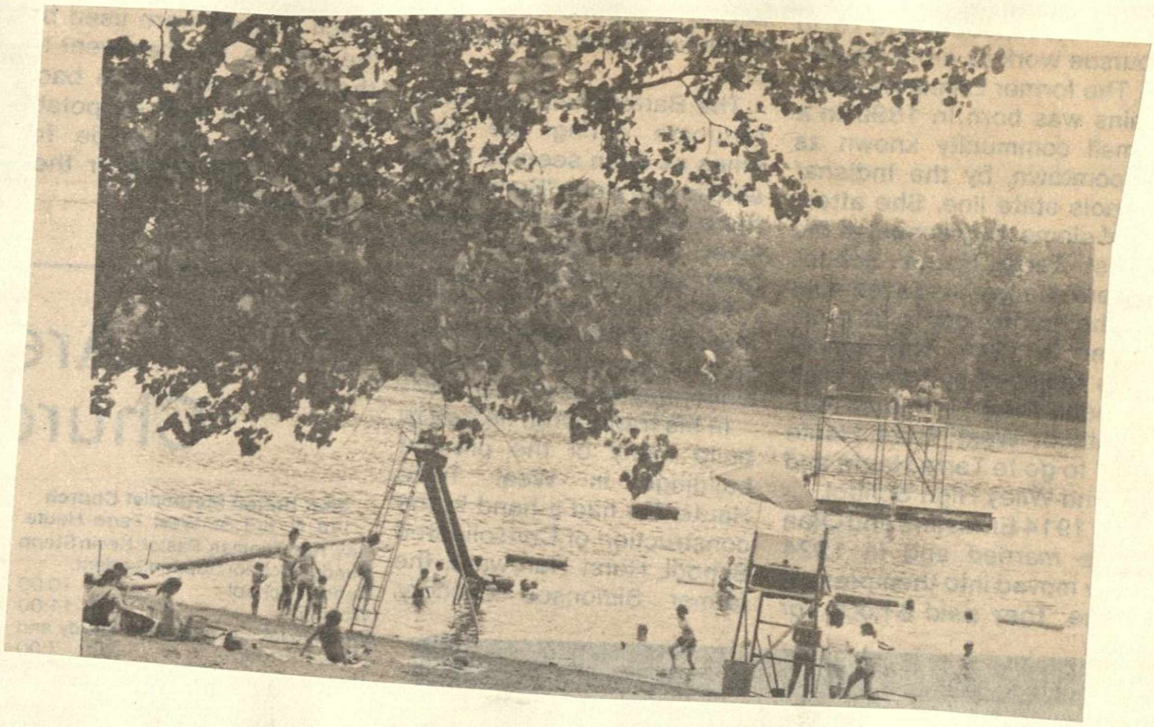
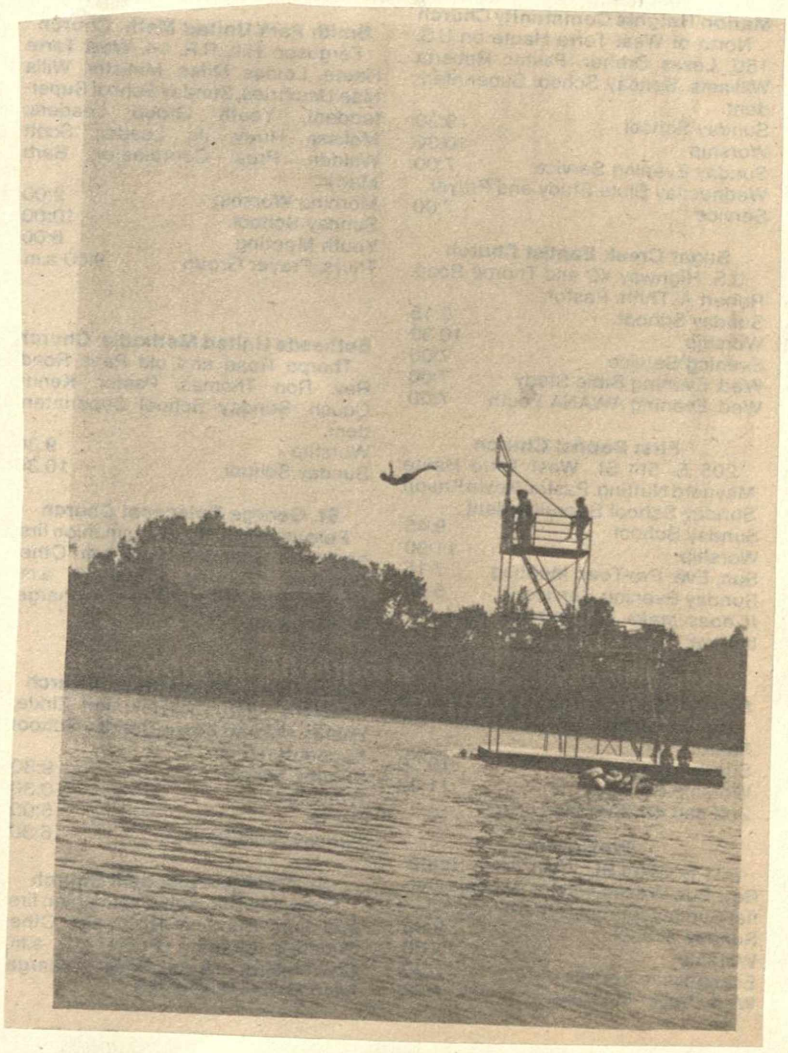
Pictured above is Southlake as it appeared 25 years ago. Below, photos of Southlake this summer.





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Southlake celebrates 40th

Southlake, a place synonymous with summertime fun for thousands of area citizens, celebrates its 40th anniversary Wednesday.

The 80-acre Vigo County lake near Darwin Road by Interstate 70 was developed as a recreational area by Herb Mason in 1946.

"That's our big attraction," said Mason, pointing to the largest of his two diving platforms. The platform has diving levels at 33 feet, 20 feet and 10 feet.

Southlake consists of a swimming beach with two diving rafts, slides for kids, picnic tables, a large beach house with a pool table, ping pong table, video games and snack bar.

A lifeguard is on duty at all times. Mason said that People may bring their own boat to launch. He added that some people water-ski in the lake.

The beach house has a large, flat roof where dances were conducted during the 1960s and up to the mid-1970s. "We've had as many as 1,000 teen-agers dancing on the roof at one time," said Mason. Well-known local bands used to play for the roof dances including Lobo, the One-Eyed Jacks, Kingsmen, Carnation and Tren-Dells.

Mason's son, Steve, is now running the family business for the first season. He plans to re-institute dances for teen-agers, but downstairs, not on the roof. Mason has bought sound equipment and turntables and will put on disc jockey-type dances.

Mason bought Isaac Walton Lake a few years ago and plans to develop that for camping, boating and skiing. His wife, Florence, helps him operate the family business.

Reduced fees will be in effect at Southlake on Wednesday, in honor of the 40th anniversary.

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Southlake: Still going strong after 40 years.